

Dr. James Naismith

(Spoken at his funeral at the First Presbyterian Church, Lawrence, Kansas, December 1, 1939, by Theodore H. Aszman, minister)

The term "One of God's noblemen" is sometimes lightly used and inappropriately applied. But in the case of James Naismith it can be said in all sincerity and genuineness, "he was one of God's noblemen."

The word of Scripture which ran through my mind, and would not leave, as I thought of Dr. Naismith was the familiar sentence from the fifty-first Psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." These words epitomize his life purpose.

To make and keep people clean, in the highest sense of the word, was the purpose of his living. His cleanliness was not of the negative variety but was positive, aggressive. He did not wait until he himself had given part of his life to unclean living. In no sense was he the reformed unclean liver preaching to others. Clean living seemed to have been the passion of his life from youth up.

The story of the incident that made him decide to go into physical education, because of the opportunity that profession offered for influence in right living, instead of the ministry, for which he was preparing, is most revealing and descriptive of his life motivation. While at McGill University on the football field one day something went wrong in practice. The guard next to him began to swear loudly. Suddenly he stopped and turned to Naismith and said, "I beg pardon, Jim, I didn't notice you were there." "I hadn't paid particular attention," Dr. Naismith related, "for I had heard more fluent swearing than that in the lumber camps of Canada. It set me to thinking about the matter of personal influence, and I talked about it with the Y.M.C.A. secretary." The result of that incident was the choice of his future career.

Educated for the ministry, and later honored with a Doctor of Divinity degree, he however never held a pastorate. An able speaker, he was much in demand; but in his services in this direction he drew no denominational lines. He seemed to prefer however to do his preaching in active living. His ministry was that of Christian living and of teaching. He had the fundamental instincts and a fine aptitude for teaching.

James Naismith also earned a degree in medicine; yet he never practiced medicine. He used his knowledge in this field in his chosen vocation of physical education, a vocation which he honored and on which he reflected great credit. In recognition of his outstanding work in his field, in 1931 he was given the Honor Award by the American Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. Alonzo A. Stagg and R. Tait McKinzie, two other distinguished men in this field, received this award at the same time.

His life work, he conceived of, not as curing but preventing ills. He acted on the motto, "A sound mind in a sound body." He did not wait until a wreck of body occurred and then try to patch it up. His business was the preventing of human wreckage. He did not conceive of his work as that of the ambulance driver picking up wrecks at bottom of the cliff, but to build the fence at the top of the cliff to keep human lives from being wrecked.

It was a matter of eternal justice that a man of such ideals and life purpose should have been privileged to create something, almost a discovery, of such far extended value and usefulness in his chosen field, as the inventing of basketball. This creation symbolized his own creative living. Though it put his name on the lips of millions around the world, yet to him it was only an incident in his career. To him it was no reason for inordinate pride. His gratification in the success of this invention was